

PROPERTY: TO OWN A HOUSE

Philippines

Graphic

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SINCE 1927

**PARTNERING FOR CHANGE,
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Collage by JIMBO ALBANO

Good morning, Margarita. Good morning *din po*,
ma'am, call me Rita for short.
Could she do laundry? Yes, ma'am.
Could she cook? Yes, ma'am, and also bake.
Could she care for children? Yes, ma'am, I have two
kids back home.

Margarita

W

hen her nose began to twitch and her eyes began to run, she knew she was by the ocean. It was something to do with seawater, the smell of a thousand kidney stones pureed and stirred into solution. Sea smelled too much like the ward for the elderly in the hospital she used to work at. Bedpans were Rita's specialty then; she would make the rounds at 6:00, morning and evening, draining urine into a bucket, careful not to spill anything. The job was worst right before the patient died, salt and blood mixing one into another, the smell of the rusting anchor of an old tugboat docking for the last time.

Rita was fortunate to have gotten out of nursing when she did, before all the good ones were siphoned away to Dubai and places she couldn't pronounce. She was lucky to have found Ma'am Lucero after just three months with the agency. Ma'am was seven months pregnant with a child—her first, a boy—and needed a full-time *yaya*. The interview, she recalled, was a short but amiable affair on a rainy March day in 1991 at the office:

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Could she do laundry? Yes, ma'am.

Could she cook? Yes, ma'am, and also bake.

Could she care for children? Yes, ma'am, I have two kids back home.

Back home—where was that now?—a two-storey adobe house in Tagbilaran tall and wide enough for three generations. Recently, home to her was, more and more, 192 Temple Drive, Green Meadows, Mandaluyong City, down the road and two lefts away from guardhouse gate one. But that part of her life was over, she had to remind herself, as she reached the front of the line snaking into the carpark from the port entrance, showed the guard the ticket printed for her on fresh, new copon bond, courtesy of Ma'am Lucero—

Destination? It's on the ticket, sir, Tagbilaran, Bohol.

Purpose of travel?

Going home.

Return date? No

return trip, sir.

—and like that, she dragged her luggage through the gate.

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Rita checked her phone: 11:26 am. Natnat would be having lunch early so he could get to school on time. She ran through the list of clothes she laid out on his bed—polo shirt, khaki pants, white socks—no, she mustn't do this, it wasn't her job anymore. In three more hours, she would be on board the SuperFerry, then after twenty-five more, she'd be back in Bohol.

Thirteen years in Manila—six in the hospital, the rest with the Luceros—that

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was a long time. Too long, Tia kept telling her, but then the longest Tia had been away from home was one week, back when she had been taken on as a maid by the rich Marquez family who lived just thirty minutes away by tricycle. But she had to go and get caught with a pair of Mdm. Marquez's shoes in her day bag—how was she to know there would be random inspections then? Who would have known a woman with an air-conditioned room for all her shoes would miss one out of the hundreds? Not Tia, for sure. So she stayed at home with the children, while Rita stayed firmly in Manila.

Did Tia resent her sister for leaving?

In her dark moments, maybe, but on the whole, the arrangement pleased them both. Tia loved kids, but her tastes in persons leaned towards women—younger women, to be specific—so she would never have kids of her own. No matter; her niece and nephew kept her hands full and her days busy.

Rita had an *alaga* of her own, Nathan by baptism but nothing but Natnat to her. Her charge had officially begun two days after he was born through Caesarean section, an underwhelming, frail prune of a human being. Diapers was the easy part, some distant voice in Rita's head noted; his piss was fresh, the product of a newly-changed filter, and his shit was as pungent as waterlogged loam, but always did he smell of vigor and life. She wondered why Niño and Niña didn't smell like that when they were born.

The loudspeakers announced that it was 12:39 in the afternoon, a time check brought to you by Colgate. About time, too, Rita thought. She had never planned to stay for seven years. Few do. At first, she said she would go when Natnat was big enough to go to preschool, around three, but then she was one month away from her scheduled pay raise, so she stayed. Then she said she'd go home when Natnat turned five, but he cried and cried and made such a scene that her heart gave way and she stayed. That same Christmas, mama was diagnosed with malignant spirits right before succumbing to tuberculosis, and the house reeked of fermenting barley for days.

How good it would be to see everyone after thirteen years! Rita said to herself, walking over to the vending machine beside the bathrooms. She fumbled with the change—which one was the two-peso coin again?—for Ma'am Lucero would always send her grocery shopping with crisp bills perfumed with newly-ironed polyester and the airconditioning of banks. Five pesos. *Clink. Clink.* Number A3. *Chk. Coke Zero. Whump.*

The ceiling fan gave a loud cough that degenerated into a death rattle as the blades spun slowly to a stop. The noontime warmth beat down heavily on Rita, who retraced her steps back to her spot on the bench beneath the corrugated metal roof. There in the waiting area, without the respite of the artificial breeze, a festering memory she thought was well buried beneath her parietal bone broke the surface of her consciousness, forcing itself on her:

First, the phone call, Tia frantic, sobbing; there had been some mistake, some mixup; the police had raided the opium den the night before, and some longtime residents had returned fire. When it was all over, nine were dead, including Niño. But the police were hiding something, Tia proclaimed confidently, because Niño was out with high school friends watching a horror movie last night, and she always told him to stay away from the seedy parts of town.

Then came the numbness, creeping up and around, Rita making sure to gasp audibly so as to be heard over the phone, but her heart rate hadn't increased, the medically-certified side of her noticed, nor had her pupils dilated. Nursing school had taught her the common courtesy of speaking to patients as if they would certainly make it, even when, upon entering the emergency room, they were already clearly gone.

At last, the rejection. It would take months before Tia calmed down enough to call again. No, she couldn't go home on a lark to attend Niño's funeral, she had a *real* job here in Manila. Besides, both the Luceros had gone on a business trip to Macau—something about casinos—and left Natnat in Rita's care. She couldn't just leave

him alone. Look, Tia, they'll be back on the twenty-first—no! Unacceptable! By tradition, the wake should be over by then, or the body would start to go stale. All that was left were apologies and promises to go purchase a few indulgences during Mass. Dial tone.

Had she expected it? Did she know the moral character of the men whose pockets her remittances lined? Distinguishing between truth and premonition was not her strong suit, she whom the witch doctor said had a third eye open.

Two blasts from a foghorn startled Rita, sending the memory scurrying back into its burrow. She caught her breath; it was her ship coming in. 1:24, the audience would be taking their assigned seats now, only two guests per student, dress code business casual. So much pomp and circumstance for a kindergarten graduation—"Moving Up Day," they called it—but the best way to stop boys from becoming men too fast is to treat them like they already are, rather the tailored suits and black shoes than the stitches and barbituates. Natnat was sold. There was going to be a performance, too. He had invited the entire family to watch, Rita included.

Another hour. Rita compulsively checked if her luggage had been tampered with, rotating the dials to 0-0-0, unlatching and relatching the lock, giving the dials a hearty spin for good measure. This trip couldn't be delayed any longer, she knew; already, Niña refused to admit any recollection of her, save of terse, one-sided conversations over the phone:

How are you, *anak*! Have you eaten? Yes, ma.

How is school? Is your homework done? Okay naman, ma. Yes, ma.

You take care of Tita Tia, okay? Don't give her a hard time. Yes, ma. No, ma.

Conversations with Natnat were one-sided, too, but the other way around. On the drive home from preschool, he would tell her everything that happened to himself and the sixty-odd other souls in the small building, what he had for recess, which girl was cute and which girl he thinks finds him handsome, the number of times he gave the best answer in class (it was always increasing), the spat between Jonathan and Marco over their eraser collections. How petty newspaper headlines seemed to Rita in comparison to a seven-year-old's life.

1:38. The ferry refuels, drinking deeply from the tanks by the pier. The passengers disembarked and walked off 25-hour cramps as the national anthem came to a close and Marco's nasal voice began the opening prayer. Rita could recite that prayer word for word, from *Let us put ourselves in the presence of God* down to *Amen*, having heard the kids practicing the ceremony in the auditorium not twenty steps away from her spot outside the dismissal gate. There were many *Chuatocos* and *Dela Cruzes* in Natnat's class, and Lucero would be forty-five minutes, an hour away.

Ma'am Lucero took Rita's resignation well, and was gracious enough—as always—to buy the ferry ticket for her at one of those travel expos for a cheap, cheap price. NONREFUNDABLE AND NON-TRANSFERABLE, the ticket said, CHANGE OF DATE OF DEPARTURE NOT PERMITTED. It was almost the end of May, and June brought with it the tropical monsoons. She couldn't push it back any further, this much Rita understood through the fog of her heat-drowsy. She couldn't—

—and then the damned memory resurfaced, taking this time the

form of Niño on an April morning in '85, screaming and sobbing and begging her not to leave! Rita struggled to free herself from his grasp, not that she didn't understand why; he was two, and the more mature of the twins, his sister a little less able to comprehend the natures of loss and distance. But Niño simply refused to conceive of a world without her in it. He threatened to stop having meals, taking baths, doing anything that involved his mother in some way or another. He hit her arms, compelling her through sheer physical power to stay. It was grief of the purest kind, the kind that manifests as anger, and Rita was a little relieved to be done with such juvenile violence.

1:50—the vibrating alarm on her phone snapped Rita back to the safety of the present. Boarding had begun. Beads of sweat

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Tia had asked her more than once.
He's not your son.**

meandered down her nape as she turned to crane her neck. There were taxis at the stand outside; at this time of day, probably fifty minutes to the school. There was time enough to catch the performance towards the end, at the very least.

Why do you care so much about him? Tia had asked her more than once. He's not your son.

Neither is Niña your daughter, Rita would reply. And there the argument was always cut short.

Rita stood. She popped open the Coke, which had gone lukewarm. The bubbly fizz stung her nostrils like the bitter-sweet antiseptic of fresh bedsheets in the terminal ward. She took a sip. **G**